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ABSTRACT

This study examined the attitudes of Swedish junior high students concerning student participation in deciding matters that affect them. Over 100 students and their teachers were interviewed, class committees and school meetings were observed, and the students completed a short questionnaire. To illustrate the pitfalls that a study of pupils' joint influence or co-determination can entail, Arnstein's chart, "Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation," which is frequently referred to in evaluations of citizen participation in planning processes, is discussed. The eight rungs are: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. Study findings show that when asked about the influence exerted by children on their situation at a school, the great majority (70 percent) felt that they were able to decide just about the right amount. Nearly three-quarters of the pupils said that they did not know how much children were capable of deciding. Concerning pupils' desire for decision-making powers at school, 83 percent felt that things were just right as they were. (RM)

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Class committees

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Current project

TITLE OF PROJECT: CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION AT JUNIOR LEVEL

Several survey reports have appeared containing suggestions about children's rights and participation in the decision of matters which affect them. Formalised co-determination, however, is liable to degenerate into pseudo-democracy.
Does the class committee reform entail any risk of this kind?
What in fact are the opportunities and limitations concerning responsibility and co-determination for junior level pupils in the conditioning and transformation of their environment?

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Background

Expressions such as civic participation, joint influence and co-determination have come to be more and more widely used in recent years. It is a democratic objective and an expectation on the part of the community for people to play an active part in and assume responsibility for certain decision-making processes (cf. the Swedish Co-determination Act, Govt. Bill Prop. 1975/76:105, App. 1). Several study groups have put forward proposals concerning the entitlement of children to participate and help decide matters affecting them personally. The new curriculum, Lgr 80, strongly emphasises the active participation of pupils both in school work and in the shaping of the school environment. The introduction to the section dealing with goals already makes clear:

> "It is the duty of schools to give their pupils increasing responsibility and powers of co-determination as they grow older and mature." (p. 13)

Andersson (1983) has compiled an extensive research overview concerning pupils' school environments. Several studies in the overview have shown that pupils want to exert more influence on their own situation, and that this is conducive to greater satisfaction and a feeling of work becoming more meaningful. In other words, the findings suggest that the relationship between the degree of influence and involvement in one's work is the same in schools as in other workplaces.

Strategy and purpose

Taking the above mentioned research overview as its starting point, the National Board of Education has funded a project concerning pupil influence. The aim of this project is to elucidate opportunities and limitations concerning joint influence for junior level pupils in connection with the conditioning and transformation of their own environment as envisaged in Lgr 80. "Participation", "joint influence" or "co-determination" being such a vague concept and employed in

so many different contexts, some definition or elucidation is called for. The project therefore began with a content analysis of the term "participation", as used in the Education Act, the Education Ordinance and Lgr 80.

Problem fields for this study have been defined on the basis of a model of ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological approaches in psychology stress the importance of a phenomenological perspective in research, i.e. using the frame of reference of the individuals observed as a means of understanding their behaviour. Since the duration of the project is restricted to about two years, a more comprehensive study of pupil joint influence was out of the question, and I therefore chose to observe class committees and general meetings at two schools, as well as interviewing just over 100 pupils in six junior level classes. Their teachers were also interviewed concerning the pupils' assumption of responsibility and joint influence and their experiences in this connection, added to which the pupils completed a short questionnaire.

This project is to be regarded as a pilot study with a view to more extensive investigations of pupil influence in which it will be possible to trace the process over a longer period of time, so as also to study the long-term consequences for the pupils.

A model for different forms of joint influence

The curriculum does not clearly define the meaning of such terms as "participation", "joint influence" and "greater influence", which makes them very liable to misinterpretation. One is tempted to equate the expressions with "co-determination", but the curriculum does not say whether or not this is the intention.

One difference between the two terms is that co-determination implies participation in and responsibility for decision-making, while joint influence means that the decision-maker canvasses the opinions and preferences of the general public but still has the last word. But the

latter applies to formal decision-making processes. Of course there are also informal means of exerting influence which the general public and decision-makers are to a greater or lesser extent aware of and amenable to.

To illustrate the pitfalls which a study of pupils' joint influence can entail, I would refer to a model employed by Arnstein (1969), an American planner, to demonstrate different degrees of influence in decision-making processes. Although the model is simplified and does not include all the degrees actually or conceivably occurring, it may help to clarify various concepts. Three levels of participation are specified, viz (1) non-participation, (2) degrees of tokenism and (3) degrees of citizen power. Arnstein also makes clear the risks of bogus democracy and bogus participation (or tokenism) which participation experiments can involve.

Arnstein calls her chart "Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation", and this ladder is frequently referred to in evaluations of citizen participation in planning processes.

The bottom two "rungs" do not really imply any joint influence at all, because the participants are merely kept occupied. Nor do "information", "consultation" and "placation" guarantee that there will be any change. There is a risk of pseudo-influence involved here. The participants have an advisory function, but the wielders of power still reserve for themselves the right to make the decisions. The top three rungs of the ladder, on the other hand, indicate levels of increasing powers of decision-making and, accordingly, genuine co-determination.

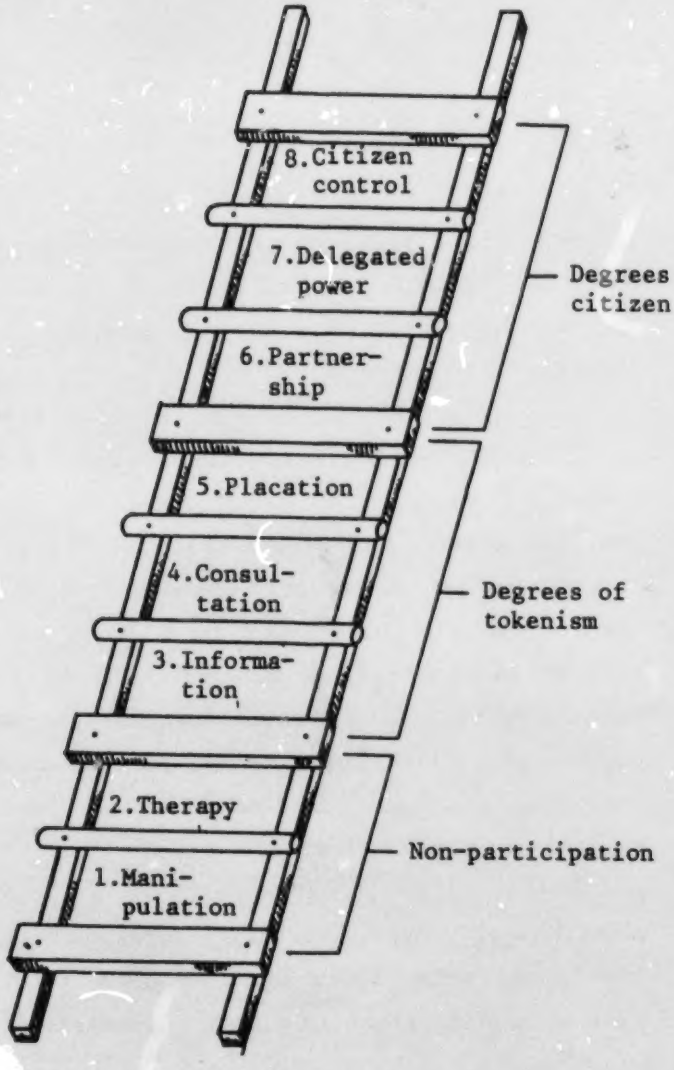

Figure 1.
Arnsteins ladder

It is manipulation to invite children to sit on panels at conferences and suchlike but on the terms dictated by adults. Children are unfamiliar with this mode of communication and are therefore unable to prepare for the situation. As a result, nobody listens to them but they are applauded and photographed. There is a risk of this kind when pupils are represented on pupil committees or at working unit conferences. On occasions like this they have frequently been given too little time to familiarise themselves with the various topics and with points of procedure.

Therapy is a form of joint influence where people's powerlessness is put down to their own inadequate competence. The curriculum states that the pupils should participate in everyday work at school, and Lgr 80 refers by way of example to several practical tasks in which they can participate: helping to keep the school tidy or helping with library and copying work, doing running repairs and taking charge of

ca ring and table-laying. In the course of these practical activities, the pupils are expected to gain experience of democratic co-operation.

The children at one leisure centre took turns in hosting tables, which among other things involved helping to lay the tables and serve food. To make their work more meaningful and qualified, they were eventually also required to plan the daily light meal for one week, make the necessary purchases and do the cooking. In this way the children gradually assumed more and more responsibility for a particular task. And in this way too, the risk of their work being classed as occupational therapy was eliminated.

Informing citizens about their rights, responsibilities and opportunities of choice is an important initial step towards civic participation. But information often comes too late, affording little opportunity of joint influence. Lgr 80 makes it the duty of the head teacher to inform and consult representatives of pupils and their parents, so as to augment their opportunities of exerting influence. But even this can lead to "symbolic joint influence", since the duty of consultation is subject to certain reservations. If time is short, for example, the head teacher can make a decision without consulting or informing the pupil and parental representatives first.

Consultation is involved, for example, when pupils evaluate school activities. Unfortunately the curriculum requires evaluation to take place at the end of the school year. True, if the pupils do not change levels in the meantime they will be able to derive benefit from their evaluation the following term, but with the summer holiday coming in between, the feedback of their information or evaluation comes so late that it is unlikely to do them any real good.

Informing citizens and finding out their opinions, then, are important steps towards authentic joint influence. The commonest method is to consult people by means of attitude surveys, neighbourhood meetings or public hearings. But this form of joint influence is sheer hypocrisy

if it does not result in citizens' concerns and opinions being taken into consideration. A number of planners asked a group of children to draw their ideal town and play area as input documentation for planning purposes. But the drawings were never returned and the children were never told what use, if any, had been made of their suggestions. A good example of education for powerlessness.

Arnstein uses the term placation to describe occasions when there is a certain measure of civic representation but the wielders of power have taken care to ensure that it will not be sufficient to threaten the traditional power structure. Mere placation orlegitimisation is liable to be the upshot of pupil representation in working units. This kind of participation requires, on the part of teachers and pupils alike, a great deal of knowledge and experience concerning the conduct of meetings and democratic procedure, if there is to be more to joint influence than mere legitimisation.

Partnership implies an actual redistribution of power through negotiations between citizens and rulers. According to Arnstein, this type of joint influence is most frequently attained as a result of citizens (usually in the form of action groups) taking over and retaining their share of power. With delegated power they achieve powers of co-determination at a certain level or within a certain programme; citizen control means that they themselves direct and are responsible for certain programmes or institutions.

It is hard to find examples of children in school possessing the autonomy indicated by these uppermost levels. They do have this "power", however, in the games which they themselves start and decide the rules for. To some extent this is also true of such features of school life as the "fun period".

Some research findings

The questionnaire survey already referred to yielded a number of findings which may be of interest in this context. Among other things,

the pupils were asked about the influence exerted by children on their situation at school. Barely a quarter of them felt that their influence was slight. Less than 10% of them felt that they were able to decide a great deal. The great majority (about 70%) felt that they were able to decide just about the right amount.

The interview replies conveyed a more articulate picture than the replies to the questionnaire:

> "We can decide quite a lot, actually. What rules we are to have. We decide that at the general meeting. That we mustn't throw snowballs in the playground. That we have a target board that we can throw balls at and that we mustn't throw balls onto the roof, because then we might break windows."

> "Decide? No. Other children can't either. It's the teachers who decide things."

Replying to a question about children's capacity for deciding things at school, nearly three-quarters of the pupils said that they did not know how much children were capable of deciding. Most of the remainder, though, felt that children could decide more than they were now allowed to. Only a small minority felt that children were unable to decide as much at school as they were now doing.

> "Can we decide things? Difficult question. Sometimes we can decide ever such a lot, sometimes just a little. They talk to us. What do we think about this and that. Miss tells us what to do, but she has to, otherwise children might learn things wrong and that makes things ever so difficult later on."

> "Yes, sometimes we decide things. Miss decides most, and so she should."

A third question concerned the pupils' desire for decision-making powers at school. Only 2% wanted to decide less than they were already

doing, and 15% wanted to decide more. The others felt that things were just right as they were.

> "Yes, we can decide things. It's hard to say straight off any particular thing we can decide. Sometimes Miss gives us something to choose from or else she says 'you do this and you do that'. Sometimes it's fun things. It's much simpler when she decides. Because if she writes on the board 'you can do either this, that or the other' it's more difficult, because then you don't know what to choose."

Another question concerned the pupils' attitudes towards different activities at school. The activities they were asked about comprised (1) school work in general, (2) their own planning/work and (3) class committees. More than 80% of the children were happy in their own work. Second in order of appreciation came school work in general (64%). The lowest score was registered for class committee activities (45%). There were only a few isolated replies indicating a purely negative attitude to all three activities.

Finally the pupils were asked to specify the sort of questions which they felt the class committee should (1) pay more attention to, (2) pay less attention to or (3) was paying the right amount of attention to already. It was above all questions concerning outings and class parties which were thought to require more attention from the class committee. Questions of conduct and discipline had least appeal.

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